

Officer Testing 1900-2015

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Introduction

Over the span of a century, the Army has progressively diluted its intellectual screening instruments for the selection of officers. This fact, however, is not widely recognized by academics and policy wonks. In a recent book, one social scientist with a long involvement with the area of officer screening flatly states that “there was little systematic screening of officer candidates prior to World War II.”¹

In our opinion, nothing could be further from the truth. To be sure, the Army’s psychometric instruments for officer selection have been refined and its resultant ability to predict career success and retention in service has been significantly increased since 1900. This has not, however, been accompanied by more rigorous tests of academic achievement or mental ability. In fact, while the Army has been increasing its reliance on psychometric principles, the emphasis of officer testing has shifted from academic ability to non-cognitive factors such as motivation and likelihood of retention. The tests of intellectual ability and attainment presently in use are weak approximations of those employed a century ago. This long-term trend is troubling given the Army’s current emphasis on the development of cognitive skills in officers and the perceived lack of strategic acumen among the Army’s field grade leaders.

This relaxation of mental standards is indirectly reflected in the Military Academy’s relative decline as an elite academic institution. In the first half of the 20th century, it outdid the nation’s most distinguished civilian undergraduate institutions on tests of academic achievement. As late as 1946, West Point cadets outperformed Yale undergraduates on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). By 1960, however, this had changed and by the early 21st Century, West Point

cadets scored, on average, well below their Yale counterparts. In fact, by 2014, the Military Academy was virtually on par with such institutions as Ohio State, a reputable and distinguished institution certainly, but not one that is elite by undergraduate admissions standards.²

West Point's decline in selectivity is underscored by the decreasing percentage of cadets who have had prior college work before attending the Academy and the quality of the institutions that these cadets attended. Forty three percent of the class of 1901, for example, had matriculated at other colleges before attending West Point. Among the institutions represented were University of Chicago, Columbia, Cornell, Harvard, Stanford, Johns Hopkins, MIT, the Naval Academy, University of Pennsylvania, and Yale. After World War II, the percentage of cadets with prior college experience began an extended decline. By 2014, only 11.7 percent of West Point's graduating class had prior college experience and, as one might expect, none of the institutions named above were represented among cadets.³

The long-term decline in mental standards is also reflected in the declining selectivity of colleges in the Army ROTC institutional base. From 1946 (the first year that ROTC became a major source of officers for the active army) until the mid-1960s, the decline in selectivity was moderate. A few relatively selective institutions lost their ROTC units and a few less selective institutions were added to the ROTC institutional base but the qualitative balance of the ROTC was largely preserved. The threat of conscription, of course, accounted for much of this. The big change in the ROTC came during the Vietnam War and its immediate aftermath when some of the nation's most elite colleges—to include Harvard, Yale, and Stanford—dropped their ROTC unit while scores of less competitive state-run institutions in the South, West and Mid-West gained programs. As one might expect, the average SAT scores of ROTC cadets on

standardized tests dropped markedly after the Vietnam, reflecting the reality of officer accessions in the age of the all-volunteer force.⁴

Intellectual Screening Instruments—West Point

The rigor of admissions tests of mental ability and academic achievement used at the Military Academy noticeably declined from the beginning of the 20th Century until today. The entrance exams used until World War II were quite rigorous. These tests required cadets to demonstrate a high level of proficiency in a variety of academic subjects and exceeded in rigor those standardized instruments offered by the educational testing service.

After World War II, the Military Academy gradually transitioned to the SAT, which it officially adopted as part of its entrance exam in 1956. In the same year, it adopted the English Composition and Mathematics Achievements Tests as the second part of the admissions screening process. The 1950s, incidentally, was the decade in which institutions like Yale caught up with and then surpassed West Point in terms of scores on the SAT. In 1973, the intellectual bar was lowered again when the Academy dropped the English Composition and Mathematics Achievement Tests as part of the admissions process. This left only the SAT as a gauge of intellectual attainment.⁵

Intellectual Screening Instruments—ROTC/Candidates from Civil Life

Before World War II, candidates from civilian life seeking a commission had to pass a very rigorous test of academic achievement, far more difficult than the standardized tests offered by the Educational Testing Service. The demand for candidates from civilian life was small so the Army could afford to be quite selective. The Army's official description of the test, one observer commented, read "like a college catalog." The exam covered the subjects that were part of the curriculum at most high quality liberal arts institutions and required a passing

knowledge of U.S. history, geography, spelling, grammar, composition, algebra, plane geometry, natural science, and “ordinary problems involving the use of logarithms” in addition to tests required by the branch for which they were applying.⁶

After World War II, the Army used the ROTC Qualifying (RQ) test to screen cadets for acceptance into the Advanced Course. By design, it was developed to screen out 16 percent of test takers. The exam itself resembled the SAT in both rigor and subject matter. It was not nearly as rigorous as the tests used to screen civil applicants before the war but it did serve the purpose of ensuring a minimum degree of literacy and numeracy among advanced course cadets in ROTC.⁷

After Vietnam and the advent of the All-Volunteer Force, the Army introduced a new ROTC screening instrument. Finding that the RQ test was too rigorous in a recruiting environment without conscription, it adopted the Cadet Evaluation Battery (CEB), which was part psychometric tool and part mental ability test. It was introduced in 1972, the last full year when conscription was in effect. Although it was not nearly as cognitively rigorous as the old RQ, it measured the decline in cognitive ability among cadets entering the ROTC Advanced Course in the aftermath of Vietnam. The average score fell from 22 to 17—a 22 percent decline over a four year period. In reality, the cognitive decline was steeper than the scores indicate since less than half the exam measured cognitive ability.⁸

In 1983, the Officer Selection Battery (OSB) was introduced into the Army officer selection inventory, replacing the CEB. It resembled the CEB in that it was part psychometric survey instrument and part a test of mental ability. However, it was never used as a screening instrument. Certain college presidents protested that its use as a screening device would prevent many students at their schools from earning a commission. Eventually, it was retained as an

academic diagnostic instrument, identifying cadets who had difficulty with basic academic skills. The Professional Development of Officers Study (PDOS), completed in 1985, found that roughly a quarter of the junior officers on active duty had below a 12th grade reading level—a finding that greatly disturbed Army leaders. The OSB identified cadets with marginal reading skills and shunted them into remedial programs.⁹

After the end of the Cold War, the OSB gradually faded into desuetude. In 1996, Cadet Command did away with the OSB entirely. From then on, the ROTC program operated without a mental screening instrument. Contrary to what some scholars have reported, the SAT, ACT and other standardized tests of academic attainment did not replace the OSB. These tests are required only of certain types of scholarship cadets. This fact was highlighted after the outbreak of the Second Gulf War, when young men and women who could not attain a score of 110 on the GT—the qualifying score for entry into the National Guard OCS program—enrolled in the ROTC, where a standardized test was not part of the selection procedure. They were able to circumvent the system and earn their commission in the National Guard in this way. Of all the commissioning sources, the decline in cognitive testing has been the most dramatic in the ROTC.¹⁰

Intellectual Screening Instruments—Enlisted/OCS

Before World War II, enlisted candidates seeking commissions were subjected to the same rigorous tests as civilian candidates. Like their civilian counterparts, they had to pass an examination that encompassed the academic subjects required in a good liberal arts college. World War I and World War II forced the Army to deviate from this model because of the tremendous number of officers needed. In both of the aforementioned wars, the Army had to resort to less rigorous tests of mental ability (the IQ test in World War I and the Army General

Classification Test (AGCT) in World War II) to sort through tens of thousands of officer aspirants in a timely manner. Following World War II, the huge size of the force compelled the Army to retain standardized tests of mental ability as its intellectual screening instrument.

Why the Reduction in Rigor?

Growth of Officer Corps relative to the US Population. The progressive reduction in rigor in officer cognitive testing from the beginning of the 19th Century until the present was due to a confluence of factors, only the weightiest of which can be discussed here. Probably the most obvious and easily demonstrable of these factors is the size of the officer corps relative to the size of the population. Simply stated, the vast increase in the size of the officer corps relative to the size of the population has led to less rigorous selection standards.

Over the last century, the population of the United States has increased three-fold while the size of the officer corps has increased almost 25-fold. In 1903, roughly 1 in every 25,000 people in the U.S. were Army officers. Today, roughly 1 in every 3,120 people are Army officers. With such a trend line, dilution of standards is inevitable.

Declining Prestige and Attractiveness of a Military Career. Since the beginning of the 20th Century and particularly since World War II, the prestige and attractiveness [as opposed to popularity] of a military career has declined, at least among the so-called “best and brightest” of the nation’s undergraduates. This development reflects, among other things, the shift from an Agricultural Age to an Industrial Age to an Information Age economy over the last century and a half. In the Agricultural Age and throughout much of the Industrial Age, military development led civilian development in terms of technology and organization. In the Information Age, the opposite is true. As late as the 1970s, military R&D had spinoffs in the civilian sector. In the 21st Century, technological advancements pioneered by civilian firms are taken up by the

military services. Moreover, military men were the undisputed masters of the national security realm in the Industrial Age. Today, scientists and engineers are arguable more vital to national security than soldiers.

The declining prestige and attractiveness of a military career is reflected in the social composition of the officer corps. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the officer corps was a middle to upper middle class club. By the second half of the 20th Century, it was a middle to lower middle class organization. Morris Janowitz referred to this change as the “democratization” of the officer corps. No longer would the sons and daughters of presidents and congressmen select West Point over prestigious civilian institutions for their undergraduate education. The most dramatic socio-economic change in the officer corps began after World War II as evidenced by the changing religious make-up of the Corps of Cadets at West Point. Before 1941, West Point was a bastion of mainline Protestant orthodoxy. By the mid-1950s, the religious composition of the Military Academy had been transformed, with lower status religious denominations now predominating. Peter Karsten attributed this development to the simultaneous expansion of college education among heretofore underrepresented religious groups and the decline of West Point as an elite educational institution.¹¹

Expansion of College Financial Aid and Funding. The amount of financial aid available to students exploded in the early fifties and has been on the rise ever since. This resulted in a fundamental change in the admissions process at some of the nation’s most prestigious universities. Heretofore they had essentially screened their annual intake of students by the metrics of wealth. With the increased availability of financial aid, they now screened primarily by cognitive ability. In this new, more competitive admissions environment, the service academies inevitably lost ground to their civilian competitors.¹²

Growth of Military Competition. The growth of the Navy and the Air Force after World War II presented recruiting challenges to the Army and its officer accessioning programs. The size of the Navy's officer corps grew to a size more than seven times greater than its prewar strength. The Marine Corps experienced a similar expansion. The Air Force represented a new element of competition. In the interwar period, Air Corps personnel strength had been included under the Army personnel account. After the war, it was an independent organization whose officer needs exceeded those of the Army. In such an environment, dilution of entry standards was inevitable.

Increasing Emphasis on Retention. The Army began to place increasing emphasis on retention in the Army as a factor in officer selection beginning in the 1960s. This emphasis increased substantially after the advent of the AVF in 1973. From the 1960s until the present day, researchers have repeatedly found that an inverse relationship existed between high levels of academic attainment and an officer's likelihood of remaining in the Army past his or her initial service obligation. That is why, over the past three decades or so, four-year ROTC scholarship winners and Military Academy graduates remain in the Army past their initial military obligation at approximately half the rate of enlisted-option OCS officers. In the 1910s, the top quarter of the graduating class at the Military Academy remained in the service at a much higher rate than the bottom three quarters of the class. In today's recruiting environment, that is no longer the case.

Officer testing reflects this concern with retention. For the first half of the 20th Century, the focus of officer screening was on mental ability. After the Second World War, various psychometric tests that emphasized non-cognitive selection factors received greater emphasis. This trend has contributed to the dilution of intellectual rigor in officer selection testing.

Recent studies have suggested that there is a mental “sweet spot” for Army officer accessions. That sweet spot focuses on the SAT range of between 1000—1150. Officer aspirants in this range are intelligent enough to perform the tasks that they are presently expected to master and likely to remain in the service. Candidates who score below 1000 often fail to master those tasks. Candidates who score above the 1150 threshold are retention risks. Whether officers who score between 1000 and 1150 have the requisite intellectual skills to become strategists or to exhibit the required amount of intellectual adaptability and innovation that some contend are necessary is officers in an open question.

Achieving Diversity Goals. The Army’s attempt to achieve diversity goals has also affected its intellectual screening procedures. Simply put, some minorities struggle to perform well on standardized tests. Some charge that this is due in part to the cultural bias in the tests. In any case, this fact has long been known and college presidents whose institutions have high minority enrollments object when the Army attempts to place too much emphasis on standardized tests of mental ability or achievement in its officer selection process.¹³

Concluding Thoughts

What practical significance do our findings have for the U.S. Army? We feel that they serve as a necessary corrective to certain historical misperceptions that portray officer accessions over the past century or so as a story of unremitting progress. Operating from faulty premises colors the whole tenor of the discussion about officer selection and gives decision-makers a shaky contextual base from which to start.

We believe our findings also reinforce the importance of some of the initiatives currently underway relative to the management of the officer corps. The Talent Management initiative currently being pursued by the Defense Department and the Army is essential to maximizing the

value of the officer talent currently on hand. The fact that mental screening procedures have become less rigorous over the years does not mean that the Army lacks a substantial reservoir of talent upon which to build. It only underlines the importance of documenting, managing and utilizing the talent that is available to the fullest possible extent.

Our research also accentuates the importance of initiatives like the graduate school for service option (GRADSO), which allows promising young officers the opportunity to continue their education and expand their intellectual horizons. This can only make them better officers and better strategists. Moreover, the GRADSO program, which has been temporarily suspended in the name of economy, serves as a powerful retention tool for the most intellectual capable of our junior officers. And this becomes increasingly important as the Army will undoubtedly face even keener competition from business for the best and brightest of the nation's undergraduates in the future.

¹ Janice H. Laurence and Michael D. Matthews, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Military Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 141.

² U.S. Military Academy, *Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1947* (West Point, NY: USMA, 1948), 22-23.

³ *The Howitzer, 1900* (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy, 1901), 23. At the beginning of the 20th Century, West Point had more representative in *Who's Who in America* than any other American undergraduate institution. By the late 1930s, it was ranked 15th, although it was much smaller than some of the elite civilian institutions with which it liked to compare itself. By the mid-1950s, it was 25th and by the late 1960s, the Academy stopped tracking this metric.

⁴ ROTC/NDCC Enrollment Reports, Opening, School Year 1946-47 through School Year 1974-75.

⁵ United States Military Academy, Catalog, School Year 1955-1956 through School Year 1973-1974.

⁶ John J. Lenney, *Rankers: The Odyssey of the Enlisted Regular Soldier of America and Britain* (New York: Greenberg, 1950), 112; U.S. War Department, *Special Regulations A: Examinations of Candidates for Appointment in Regular Army* (Washington, DC: War Department, May 17, 1920), pp. 9-10; Charles J. Denholm, *Officer Promotion and Elimination*, Individual Study, U.S. Army War College, March, 1956, 4.

⁷ Leo J. Kotula and Helen R. Haggerty, *Research on the Selection of Officer Candidates and Cadets* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Personnel Research Office), 2.

⁸ E. Sue Mohr and Michael G. Rumsey, *Cadet Evaluation Battery: A Comparison of 1975 Male and Female Scores with One Another and with 1971 Male Scores* (Alexandria, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 1978), 12.

⁹ *Reserve Officers' Training Corps Study Group Report, Main Report* (Washington DC: HQ, Department of the Army), I: 10-11.

¹⁰ Laurence and Matthews, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Military Psychology*, 142.

¹¹ Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: The Free Press, 1971), 54; Peter Karsten, "Religious Affiliation, Father's "Calling," and Successive Advancements in the U.S. Officer Corps of the Twentieth Century," Vol.9, No. 3, *Armed Forces and Society* (Spring, 1983); 427 & 437.

¹² Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (New York: Cox and Murray, 2012), 54-58.

¹³ *Reserve Officers' Training Corps Study Group Report, Main Report, I*: 10-18.